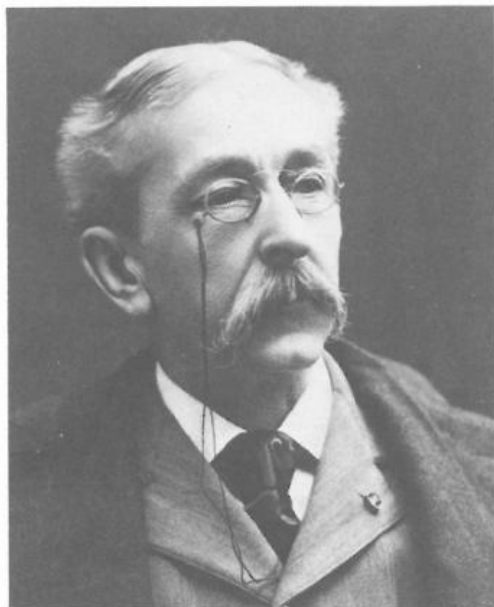


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Henry Van Brunt
1832-1903

One of the most influential and best known architects working in New England during the nineteenth century, Henry Van Brunt designed two structures in Maine. Both of these are of high quality and in many ways typical of the architect's production.

Van Brunt was born in Boston in 1832. He attended the Boston Latin School before going on to Harvard, from which he graduated in 1854. The following year he entered the Boston architectural office of George Snell. Finding his experiences there "discouraging," Van Brunt, moved to New York during the summer of 1857, and with Charles Gambrill became one of the first members of the *atelier* established by Richard Morris Hunt in his 10th Street Studio.

Hunt himself had studied architecture under Hector-Martin Lefuel at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Returning to New York in 1855, he sought to establish there an alternative to the apprentice system which was at the time the only available means for would-be architects to learn their profession. The *atelier* quickly attracted additional pupils, and Van Brunt and Gambrill were joined by G. B. Post, William R. Ware, Frank Furness, and others.

In 1861 Van Brunt completed his first independent project, an entry in the competition for the National



Academy of Design. Two years later he returned to Boston, where he formed a partnership with his fellow Hunt pupil William R. Ware. The firm of Ware and Van Brunt enjoyed early success and prestige. An *atelier* was patterned after Hunt's, and several important commissions were secured. Among these were the First Church in Boston's Back Bay (1865-7); Union Station in Worcester, Massachusetts (1873-5); St. Stephen's Church, Lynn (1881-2); and a number of buildings for the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge (1868-80) and for Wellesley College (1880-2). Perhaps the firm's best known work is Memorial Hall at Harvard University (1865-78). This huge High Victorian Gothic structure reflects both Ware and Van Brunt's early affection for English models and their attachment to the theories of John Ruskin. Indeed, the firm played a key role in popularizing the High Victorian Gothic on this side of the Atlantic.

In 1865 Ware was invited by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to organize the first formal school of architecture in the United States. Although he remained associated with the firm, his duties at MIT precluded much active participation in design work. Ultimately it was Ware's departure from MIT to found the architecture school at Columbia in 1881 that necessitated the reorganization of the firm. Frank Howe, who had been an assistant in Van Brunt's office since 1868, was made a partner, and the firm was renamed Van Brunt and Howe.

By the late-1870s a general economic downturn and an increase in the number of trained architects based in Boston were making commissions increasingly scarce. At the urging of his college friend Charles Francis Adams and with the promise of lucrative work for the Union Pacific Railway of which Adams was Chairman, Van Brunt resolved to relocate to Kansas City, Missouri. Van Brunt and Howe settled there permanently in 1887 as the first professionally trained architects working west of the Mississippi. Characteristic buildings from this phase of Van Brunt's career include his stations for the Union Pacific (Lawrence, Kansas; Portland, Oregon; Ogden, Utah; etc.); public libraries in Cambridge (1887-9) and Dedham (1887-8), Massachusetts and in East Saginaw, Michigan; a number of office

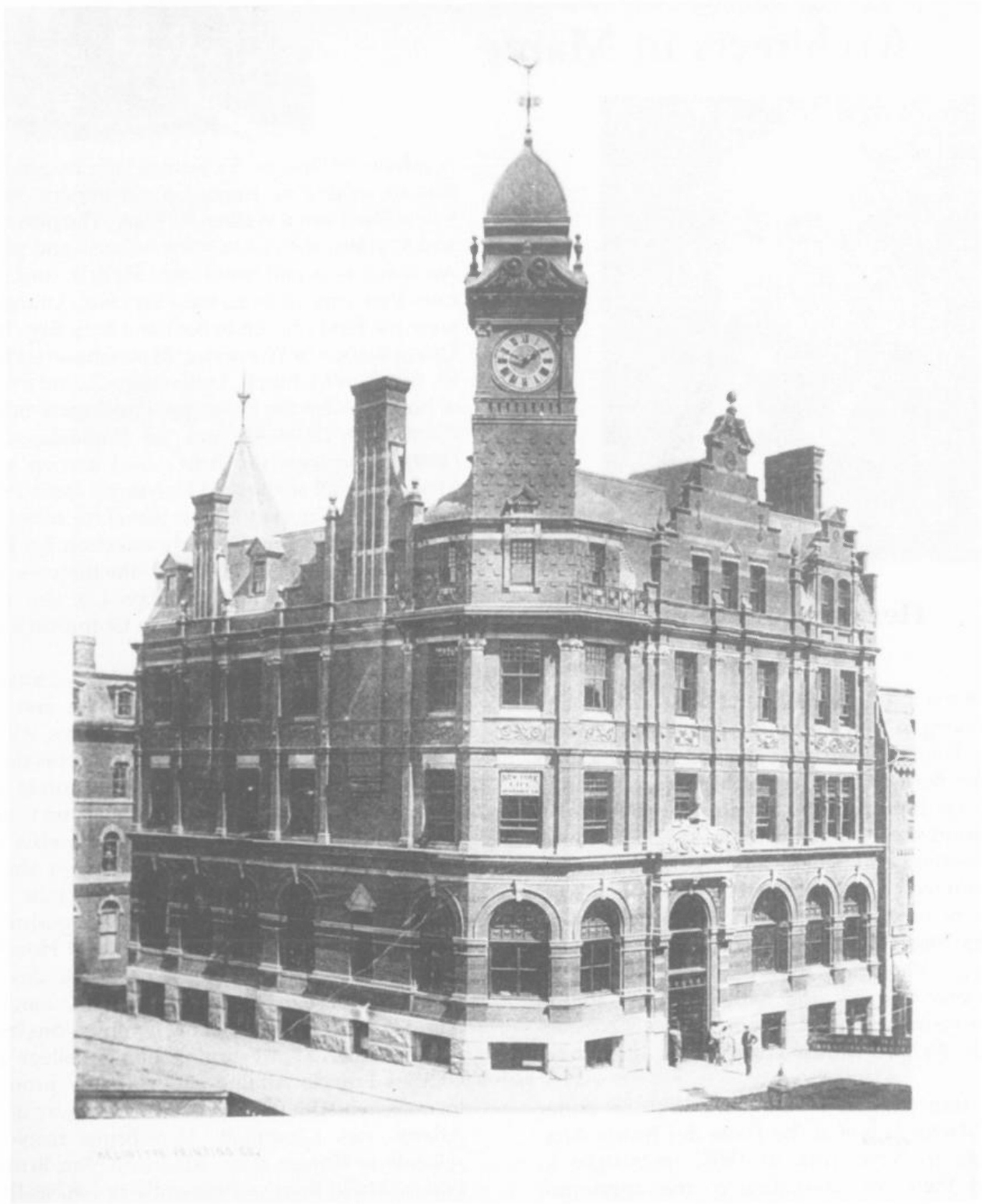


Figure 1. First National Bank Building, Portland, 1884 view (MHPC).

buildings in Kansas City; and a variety of private houses.

Although somewhat geographically isolated, Van Brunt remained well connected with the eastern and Chicago architectural establishments. He was invited to be one of the principal architects of the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1892-93 (Electricity and Wyoming State Buildings) and was elected President of the American Institute of Architects in 1899. The following year he retired from active practice and embarked on an extended tour of Europe.

Both Van Brunt's First National Bank Building in Portland of 1883-4 and his summer house at Mt. Desert of 1879-80 were designed during a period of transition in the architect's career. By the late-1870s Van Brunt had turned his back on the Victorian Gothic style which had dominated his early work, but had not yet adopted the full Richardsonian Romanesque, which was to be his favored mode from the mid-1880s until his work at the Chicago World's Fair.

Work began on the First National Bank in April of 1883 and occupancy took place in September of the following year¹ (Figure 1). The building, located at the corner of Middle and Exchange Streets in Portland, is constructed of brick and dark red freestone with contrasting panels of carved stone and terra cotta trim. As a result of a 1947 fire, the bank survives today in altered condition.

In plan the First National Bank is organized around a central rotunda, extending the full height of the building to a glass dome. The main entrance is off Exchange Street, with the principal banking rooms arranged along the Middle Street side of the building. In addition to primary space for the bank, numerous rental suites were provided.

The Bank is a somewhat eclectic and derivative work. While many features of the building's design probably owe their inspiration to English Queen Anne structures of the mid-1870s, one can point to a number of prototypes for the bank in the work of American commercial architects. The Flemish detail-

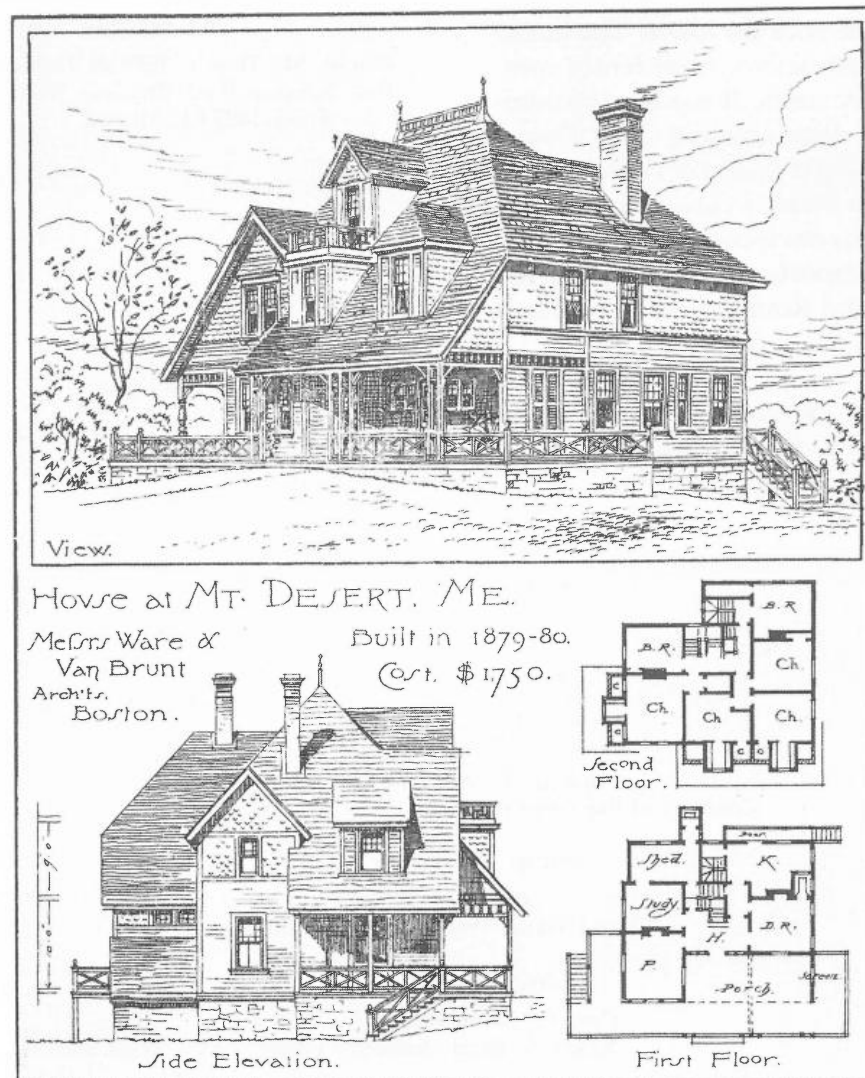


Figure 2. House at Mt. Desert, *American Architect and Building News*, July 3, 1880 (SPNEA, Boston).

ing, for example, probably owes a specific debt to the work of Henry Hardenberg, who was among the first to make extensive use of such flat applied patterns. Numerous prototypes, such as G. B. Post's initial design for the Equitable Building in New York or James Giles' New York Lord and Taylor Store, also exist for the prominent corner pavilion and side entrance. Within Van Brunt's own *oeuvre* the building is more closely related to Stone Hall at Wellesley College (1880) than to any of the architect's commercial work. The Flemish stepped gables appear fairly frequently in Van Brunt's buildings and were first employed in 1875 at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge.²

Van Brunt's only other documented work in Maine is a summer home at Mt. Desert of 1879-80³ (Figure 2). By this date the architect had built a number of city and suburban residences in a range of styles. The Mt. Desert house is, however, among Van Brunt's first essays in the Shingle Style. (It is completely devoid of the polychromy he favored only two years before in his Adam Hill and E. J. Bumstead houses.) In spite of this fact, the architect seems very much at home with the idiom. The house is straightforward and attractive, confidently composed of tight volumetric units. It is a worthy companion to the other distinguished Mt. Desert residences of the island's first period of cottage architecture. In terms of Van Brunt's career as a whole, the Mt. Desert house, so obviously inspired by H. H. Richardson, is an important link between the architect's early work and Romanesque designs of his Kansas City years.

William J. Hennessey
University of Kentucky Art Museum
April, 1985

NOTES

- ¹ For more complete information on the bank building see: "A Superb Building," *Portland Daily Press* (31 March 1883) and "First National Bank: Completion of a Superb Building — Full Description of the Edifice and List of the Tenants," *Portland Daily Press* (18 July 1884).
- ² While Van Brunt's authorship of the building is beyond question, a drawing exists by Portland architect John Calvin Steven which appears to be an early version of the bank design. The drawing is signed and dated "J. C. Stevens — September 19, 1882." Because of the very close similarity of the drawing to the executed structure, one can only assume that Stevens was in some way associated with Van Brunt in the preparation of the design, perhaps as the Boston architect's local representative in Portland. This drawing is part of the Stevens Collection of the Maine Historical Society in Portland.
- ³ The design was published in the July 3, 1880 issue of the *American Architect and Building News*, Vol. VIII, p. 263.

SOURCES

Most of the above material is adapted from the author's doctoral dissertation, *The Architectural Works of Henry Van Brunt* (Columbia University, 1978).

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY HENRY VAN BRUNT

House, Mt. Desert, 1879-80, Unlocated.
First National Bank Building, Middle & Exchange Streets,
Portland, 1883-84, Altered.

Photograph of Henry Van Brunt
Courtesy of the American Institute of Architects Archives

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